ÖST

I.S.O. CHAPTER 13

OI! IS SO?

DUDE, THAT WAS A LONG TRIP. I DUNNO HOW YOU MAKE THAT COMMUTE EVERY DAY.

EH, IT'S ONLEH A COUPLE MOAH WEEKS 'TIL TH' END OF THE SEMESTAH. THEN AI'LL BE BACK IN THE DORM WITH A NEW ROOMIE.

SPEAKIN' OF WHICH... DID CODY COME LOOKIN' FOAH ME AGAIN?

YEAH, AND I TOLD HIM THE SAME THING. HE LOOKED DISAPPOINTED.

DISAPPOINTED CUZ 'E COULDN'T RIP MAI TAIL OFF?

OH, RAIGHT. ZACH, THIS IS MAI COUSIN, ALLIE.

LIKEWISE. WE DON'T HAVE MUCH FAMILY NEARBY, SO MY PARENTS WERE HAPPY TO HAVE SOMEONE ELSE HELP CELEBRATE THE HOLIDAY. SO YOU WEREN'T ABLE TO GET TICKETS HOME?

PLEASURE, DUDETTE! AND THANKS FOR HAVING ME OVER.

WELL, WOT 'APPENED WAS...

WHOOPS. UM...HAS NOVEMBER ALWAYS BEEN THE *11TH* MONTH?

T'WAS TOTALLY AN HONEST MISTAKE.

YA BETTAH CHECK YER FLAIGHT FOAH WINTAH BREAK.

SORRY TO HEAR IT...

OOH, TURN IT UP, AI LOVE THIS SONG!!

ART & STORY BY VINCE SUZUKAWA

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'NOTHAH GREAT SONG! OH YEAH!

C'MON, JOIN ME!

WELL...

'FRAID AI CAN'T LIFT YOU!

LIFT?

THAUT'S THE SPIRIT!

HEE HEE, YOU BIG WEIRDO!

HEH, WHAT ABOUT ME? WHEN'S MY TURN?

SORRY, MAITE, BUT...

EH? WOT'S WRONG?

UM, NO LIFTING, PLEASE.

BUT...YER A CHEERLEADAH! IT'S YER JOB!

SIGH...I MAY NOT LAST LONG ON THE SQUAD...I KEEP SCREWING UP LATELY.

'AVE NO FEAH, COUS', YER LOOKIN' AT A MEMBAH OF A CHAMPIONSHIP DRILL TEAM. IF YA'D LAIKE SOME ONE-ON-ONE TUTORING, AI'M SURE 'E'D BE HAPPEH TO HELP OUT.

TOTALLY!

WHY DONCHA SHOW US WOT'S WRONG.

RIGHT NOW?

MAYBE TOMORROW; MOM'LL NEED HELP IN THE KITCHEN WITH--

GOOD LORD, WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT, DEAR?

I'M TRYING THAT NEW TOFU-BRUSSEL SPROUT SOUFFLE RECIPE! TOO MUCH SALT?

WHERE'S ALLIE, I CAN SEE WHAT SHE THINKS OF IT?

ON SECOND THOUGHT, WE COULD BE A LITTLE "LATE". CALIFORNIA TRAFFIC AND ALL, RIGHT?

SURE...

WHOA WHOA WHOA!

OKAY, NOW LIKE, STEADY... STEADY...

SEE, I DON'T GET IT, MY BALANCE THIS PAST TERM IS SHOT.

MAN, IS HE CUTE.

BUT THE EXCELLENT NEWS IS I THINK I'VE TOTALLY FIGURED OUT WHY.

REALLY?

OH!

GOTCHA!

WELL... LIKE, HOW TO PUT IT.

WERE YOU A...UH...LATE BLOOMER?

UM. MAYBE. WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?

S'JUST THAT JAKE SHOWED ME YOUR FAMILY PHOTO...

IT LOOKED PRETTY RECENT, BUT YER FIGURE SEEMED, UH... DIFFERENT.

I MEAN, UH, DON'T GET ME WRONG! YOU WERE STILL HOT, JUST LESS...Y'KNOW... BODACIOUS.

SO IF YOU, LIKE, KINDA GOT EXTRA TOPHEAVY QUICKLY, IT'D SO THROW OFF YER BALANCE.

ONE GIRL ON THE SQUAD TWO YEARS AGO WAS LIKE THAT. BUMMER.

HUH. NO KIDDING.

DID HE JUST CALL ME HOT?

YEAH! BUT SHE GOT USED TO IT, AND I'M SURE YOU WILL TOO.

OOH, THANKS, ZACH! YOU'RE A GENIUS!

NEVAH THOUGHT AI'D HEAH THAUT PHRAISE.

ANYTIME, DUDETTE!

KIDS? OH, THERE YOU ARE!

AFTER DINNER

YAWN...

GOOD THING WE DID THOSE LIFTS EARLIER. I THINK I JUST GAINED TEN POUNDS.

OH, I DON'T KNOW, YOU KIDS BURNED A LOT OF CALORIES WASHING ALL THOSE DISHES. THANKS FOR THAT!

NO, THANK *YOU*, MRS. P! IT WAS DELICIOUS! 'SPECIALLY THE SOUFFLE!

AW, THANKS, GLAD YOU LIKED.

BY THE WAY, ALLIE, TEN POUNDS SO WOULD NOT MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

OOH. BEEN WORKING OUT, HAVE YOU?

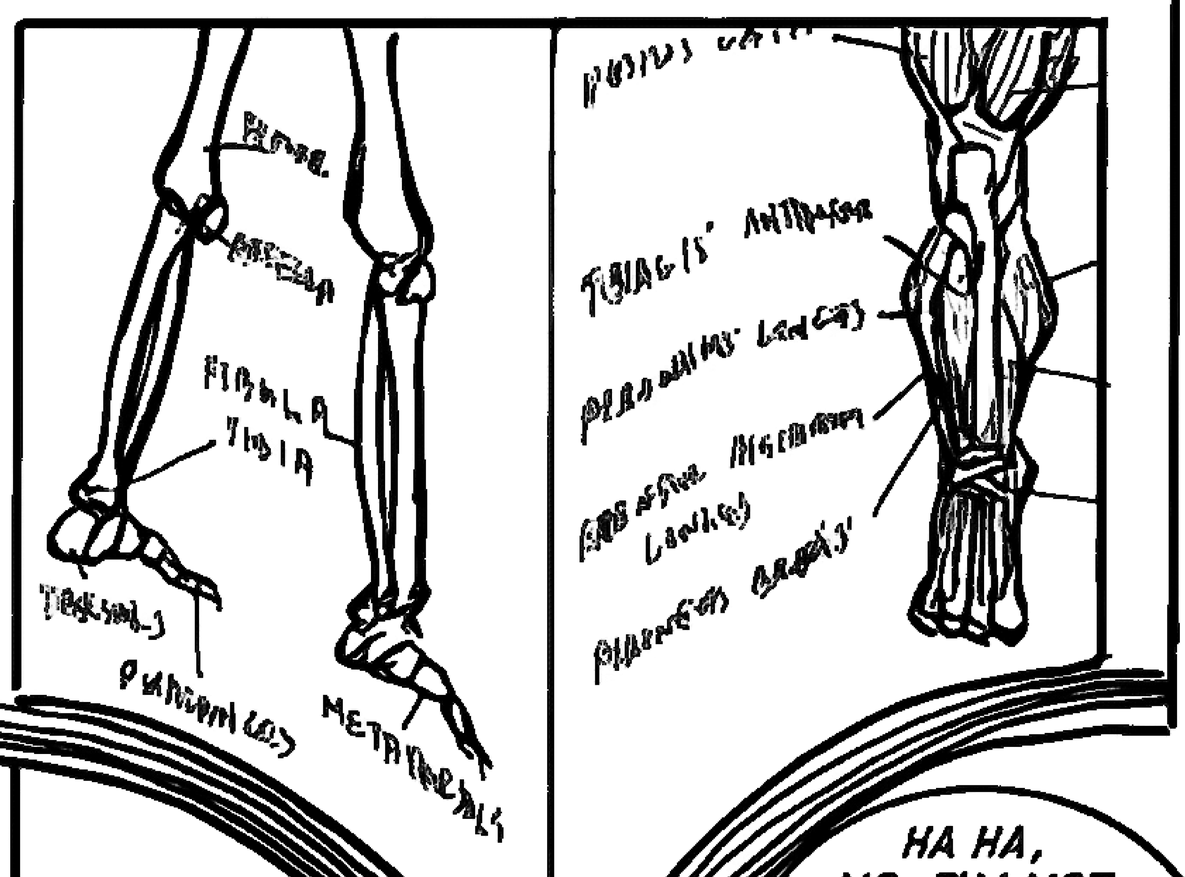
HEH, OH, I DIDN'T WANNA SAY NOTHING, BUT I'M A GYMNAST. MONDO UPPER BODY STRENGTH.

DRILL TEAM AND GYMNASTICS? HEE, WHEN DO YOU HAVE TIME TO STUDY?

WELL, S'ALL KINDA RELATED; I'M AN ANATOMY MAJOR.

I ACTUALLY TOTALLY GOT INTERESTED INNIT WHEN I HAD MY FIRST INJURY ON THE POMMEL HORSE.

GOT ME ALL CURIOUS ABOUT MY BOD.



WOW, SO YOU'RE LIKE..INTO SCIENCE?

HA HA, NO, I'M NOT SMART 'NUFF. I JUST..MEMORIZE IT 'N' STUFF, Y'KNOW? NOT LIKE I'M DOING MATH OR WHATEV.

STILL, YOU'RE DOING SOMETHINS RIGHT...

MAYBE YOU DON'T REALIZE HOW EASY YOU HAVE IT. NOT EVERYONE CAN BE THEIR OWN PERFECT ANATOMICAL REFERENCE.

HEH, NO, I'D HAVE TO LIKE, PEEL BACK MY SKIN AND STUFF. AND THAT'D BE TOTALLY GROSS!

UH, NO, I MEAN--

ALLIE, FOAHGET IT.

THE NEXT MORNING...

ALLIE? YOU'RE NAUT GOIN' OUT LAIKE THAUT, ARE YOUP

AW, IT'S THE AQUARIUM, DAD, NOT THE OPERA.

AI DON'T CARE. AREN'T YOU COLD?

BUT...I WANTED... UM...

BESIDES, JAKE'S WEARING LESS!

ER, TOO RAIGHT, BUT HE'S...UH... Y'KNOW.

ACTUALLY, DUNNO IF YOU NOTICED, MR. P., BUT JAKE'S KINDA AN ATTENTION WHORE.

HEH, UH, THANK YOU ZACH. STILL...

PLEASE, ALLIE. JUST--

OKAY, OKAY, I'LL CHANGE.

"ATTENTION WHORE", HUH? YA NEVER OBJECTED TO TH' VIEW BEFOAH, MAITE.

YEAH, BUT YER, LIKE BEING TOTALLY UNFAIR TO ALLIE HERE.

BESIDES...

IT CAN BE LIKE, Y'KNOW, UNWRAPPIN' A PRESENT SOMETIMES.

WUMP

Y'ALRAIGHT?

FINELET'SJUSTGO.

HM, GUESS I SHOULD WATCH MY STEP THERE NEXT TIME.

CANNERY ROW

AND THE AQUARIUM'S DOWN THAT WAY, BUT THIS HERE IS THE HISTORIC CANNERY ROW. IT USED TO BE A BIG SARDINE PACKAGING FACILITY.

HISTORIC? HOW SO?

OH, YOU NEVER HEARD OF IT? DID YOU EVER READ *CANNERY ROW*? Y'KNOW, JOHN STEINBECK?

OH! THE "BUELLER... BUELLER?" GUY? HE'S A RIOT!

ER...NO, THAT'S BEN STEIN. STEINBECK'S ONE OF MY FAVORITE AUTHORS, ACTUALLY. D'YOU REMEMBER READING ANYTHING OF HIS FOR A CLASS?

HM, DON'T THINK SO...

THE PEARL? EAST OF EDEN? OF MICE AND MEN? THE GRAPES OF WRATH?

'FRAID NOT.

GEORGE & LENNIE'S

GOES GREAT WITH KETCHUP!

TESORO DEL MAR

WOW...YOU MUST THINK I'M A BIG STUPID BOOKHATER, HUH?

AW, I'LL ADMIT HE'S AN ACQUIRED TASTE...HE'S NOT BIG ON HAPPY ENDINGS.

NO WORRIES, MAITE. ATHLETES LAIKE US 'AVE BETTAH THINGS TO DO THAN READ DEPRESSIN' BOOKS, EH?

UH--

THO IT DOES HELP TO FAIKE SOME BOOK SKILLZ IF YA FANCY A HAWT ENGLISH MAJAH...AI LOVE IT WHEN THEY CRY OUT BIG WORDS.

WINK WINK, NUDGE NUDGE.

DUDE, SERIOUSLY, LIKE, YOUR LITTLE COUSIN'S RIGHT HERE. CAN IT, WILLYA?

SAWRY...

INSIDE THE AQUARIUM

HOMARUS AMERICANUS

MOLA MOLA

HETEROCONGER COBRA

MOBULA MOBULAR

WOLFUS JEALOUS

LIMULUS POLYPHENUS

HM, NO THANKS. WHERE AI COME FROM, WE DON'T TOUCH THE SEA LAIFE.

SILLY, THIS TIDEPOOL IS SAFE.

OOH, A SEA STAR!

WHAT ARE YOU SMIRKING AT?

IS THAT SOP

OH, AN OBVIOUS JOKE.

OR IS IT...A BRAIN SUCKER! UH-OH, LOOK OUT!

HA! NUUU!

WELL, WE KNOW WHERE *YOUR* BRAIN IS, JAKE.

SHAME, THAT SURE DIDN'T SATISFY IT. BETTER PUT IT BACK!

AWESOME, A GREAT WHITE! THEY'RE LIKE, MONDO DIFFICULT TO KEEP IN CAPTIVITY!

'OW'D YOU KNOW THAUT?

THE BROCHURE SAID.

CAUN'T SEE? YOU CAN RAIDE MY SHOULDAHS LAIKE THAUT.

FEH.

AHEH! UM... GO SPHINXES?

HE'S RIGHT, THIS IS BETTER!

LOOKIT THAT!

CLAP

COOL!

WOW!

CLAP

MAN, HE'S STRONG!

CLAP

CLAP

SAY... YER NAUT TICKLISH, ARE YA, MAITE?

I GOT AN IDEA!

BUT I CAN'T--

TRY IT, YOU'LL HAVE BETTER BALANCE IN FRONT!

THERE, SEE?

WAIT, I EEYIPE!!

TOO LATE! BZZT!

ΘYAH!

WHOA, BOGUS, DUDE!

OOMPH!

YOU OKAY?

YEAH, BUT YOU DIDN'T ANSWER HIS QUESTION.

UH... I...

DUDE...

OI!!

WE CAN SEE THE ELECTRIC EELS NEXT! BZZT! BZZT BZZT!

SO, LIKE, A COUPLE YEARS AGO, I WENT TO A WEDDING THAT HAD TOTALLY "AUTHENTIC" CHINESE CUISINE AT THE RECEPTION.

AND IT WAS GOOD, Y'KNOW. BUT... THERE WERE THESE, LIKE, NOODLES. THEY JUST SO WOULD NOT BE CHEWED.

I ASKED MY BUD WHAT WAS UP, AND HE SAID I PROLLY DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT THEY REALLY WERE, AND HE'D TELL ME AFTERWARDS... AND HE DID.

YEAH, SO LIKE, I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO EAT NOODLES SINCE.

URGH. I MAY NOT EITHER.

AW, YA GOTTA LOVE TENTACLES, MAITE! 'SPECIALLY BIG ONES. SO MANY EVIL..*RECREAITIONAL* PURPOSES. ONES THAT SHOULD NOT BE NAIMED. CAUSES LOTSA SCREAMING. Y'KNOW? HEH-HEH.

OH! YOU MEAN THAT HUGE MONSTER DUDE WITH THE WIGGLY FACE? WHATSIS-NAME, GOOBOO-G'JOOB?

CTHULHU!

GESUNDHEIT.

OI, YOU TWO. AI THINK AI'M GONNA GO HIT THAUT RAMEN PLACE FOAH LUNCH.

LATER...

BUT...THAT WHOLE GRAVITY-DIRECTION CHANGE? IT'S TOTALLY TRIPPY.

C'MON, JUST TRY IT!

NIGHT, KIDS!

G'NIGHT!

THERE, SEE, YOU'RE GETTING THE HANG OF IT...

YEAH, I GUESS IT'S NOT SO BAD...

OI, THE EVENING'S JUST BEGINNING! LET'S GO 'AVE SOME FUN!

AI 'AVEN'T 'AD ANYONE T'GO CLUBBIN' WITH FOAH A WEEK!

UM.... DUNNO IF YER AUNT 'N' UNCLE WOULD, LIKE, WANT TO WAKE UP WITH SOME STRANGER IN THEIR HOUSE?

'EY NOW, WHO SEZ THAUT'S WHY AI'M GOIN'?

WELL, I SURE HOPE YOU WEREN'T PLANNING TOP

'COURSE NOT. AI CAN ALWAIYS GO T' THEAH PLAICE, Y'KNOW!

YIKES.

SORRY, BUT I'M KINDA HAVIN' ENOUGH FUN HERE WITH ALLIE. THIS GAME IS WAY COOL! YOU GO AHEAD.

WOT...FAINE. AI'LL CATCH YOU LATAH.

SO...IS HE ALWAYS THIS HORNY?

YOU HAVE *NO* IDEA.

SO DOES IT, LIKE, BUG YOU THAT HE SLEEPS AROUND?

DON'T *YOU* THINK IT'S DISGUSTING?

ERM, WELL, HE SEZ HE PLAYS IT SAFE. AND IT'S NOT LIKE, Y'KNOW, HE HAS'TA FORCE HIMSELF ON 'EM. IT TAKES TWO TO HORIZONTAL TANGO.

BUT I'M SURE EVERYONE CAN TELL HE'S A PLAYER...YET SOMEHOW, PEOPLE STILL FALL FOR HIS SO-CALLED "CHARM."

NOT A TRAP. REALLY!

I SHOULDN'T GO THERE...BUT, EH, HE DIDN'T NOTICE ME FLIRTING BEFORE.

I MEAN, WHO WANTS TO DRINK FROM THE SAME FOUNTAIN EVERYONE ELSE USES, SO TO SPEAK?

I DUNNO, I GUESS SOME PEOPLE FIND CONFIDENCE HOT.

ME, I WAY PREFER IT WHEN--OOH, WHADOIDONOW, WHADOIDO-NOW?

SHOOT THE OVERHANG! NO, THE UPPER ONE! THERE!

KEWL, THANKS! SO, LIKE, UM...YOU'RE SAYIN' YOU WANNA SLEEP AROUND TOO?

WHA? OH, NO NO NO! AHEH, IT JUST SEEMS UNFAIR THAT JAKE GETS TO HAVE HIS CAKE, AND EAT IT TOO.

WHEREAS IF *I* WANT TO CATCH SOME REALLY CUTE GUY'S ATTENTION, I CAN'T GET AWAY WITH ONE-TENTH OF THE FLIRTING JAKE DOES WITHOUT BEING CALLED ON IT.

IT WOULD BE NICE IF I DIDN'T HAVE TO SECOND-GUESS MYSELF.

IF IT HELPS... SOME GUYS DON'T EVEN TRY TO FIGURE OUT THE SIGNALS ANYONE SENDS, CUZ THEY GET CONFUSED WAY EASILY, AND IT'S MADE THEIR BRAINS IMPLODE BEFORE.

IT'S WHEN THEY'RE *NOT* FLIRTING THAT'S IMPORTANT. IF THEY'RE LIKE... HELPFUL. AND FUN. AND FUNNY. AND, Y'KNOW, WILL TALK TO HIM LIKE HE'S, LIKE, A REAL PERSON.

THINK THAT'D WORK ON Y--ER, SOME GUYS?

OH YEAH. TOTALLY.

MUCH LATER...

HEH, THAUT WAS FUN...

THEY REALLY MISSED OUT!

PSST... AI'M BACK. YOU TWO STILL UP?

OI!!

CRAIKEY, AI SEE ONE OF 'EM WAS.

JAKE! WAIT!!!

YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TELL MOM AND DAD ABOUT THIS, ARE YOU?

NOPE, NOPE, WOULDN'T DREAM OF IT, SECRET'S SAIFE WITH ME, LIPS SEALED, YADDA YADDA...

Y'KNOW, FOR SUCH A HORNDOG, YOU SURE SEEM RATTLED BY THIS.

WHAT, LIKE YOU'VE SEEN ZACH NAKED?

OI, IT'S NAUT EVERYDAY YOU SEE YOUR COUSIN NAKED.

MAYBE.

AH-HA I GET IT... SO, YOU'RE BENEFRIENDS? ALL RIGHT, I CAN SEE THIS BEING KINDA AWKWARD...

UH-HUH.

BUT IT'S NOT LIKE YOU TWO WERE GOING OUT...

WAIT-- NO WAY, DO YOU MEAN YOU WERE HOPING TO...? OH MY GAWD! I'M SO SORRY... I REALLY HAD NO IDEA...

SO..HE DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT ME THEN, HUHP

'FRAID NOT. AND YOU SAW ME FLIRTING WITH HIM, WHY DIDN'T YOU STOP ME?

EH, FLIRTING'S ALL PAURT OF THE GAIME.

...JUST NEVAH THOUGHT AI'D LOSE. AND REALLY, AI DIDN'T THINK YOU TWO WOULD MOVE SO FAST. YOU'VE ONLY KNOWN 'IM--

UH...

HM, AI REALLY CAUN'T CRITICAIZE.

GUESS AI'VE BEEN A PRETTY POAH EXAMPLE...

DOES THIS MEAN YOU'RE... ACTUALLY INTERESTED IN HIM, TOO? MOAH THAN JUST AS A ONE NAIGHT FLING?

OF COURSE, I WAS GOING BY MORE THAN JUST HORMONES.

HE'S SWEET AND HELPFUL, AND NOT AFRAID TO SHOW A BIT OF VULNERABILITY.

I LIKE A GUY WHO'S AWARE OF HIS SHORTCOMINGS BUT STILL WILLING TO SHOW OFF.

I CAN'T SAY I'M POSITIVE IT'D WORK IN THE LONG TERM, BUT I AT LEAST WOULD GIVE IT A SHOT, SINCE HE'LL BE HERE FOR SCHOOL FOR A FEW YEARS.

BUT THAT'S ALL STUFF YOU KNEW ABOUT...S'WHY YOU WERE AFTER HIM TOO?

UH. OF COAHSE.

HE'S HONEST AND STRAIGHT-FORWARD... I DON'T THINK HE KNOWS HOW TO BE MANIPULATIVE.

WE HAVE ATHLETICS AND CHEERLEADING IN COMMON.

HEH. AND CUZ HE'S GOT A REALLY NICE ASS, I KNOW.

YOU'D BETTER NOT BE THINKING HE ISN'T SMART ENOUGH FOR ME?

EH, MAI SAIDE OF THE FAMILY WOS NEVAH INTO ROCKET SCIENCE...

I GUESS IF IT DIDN'T BOTHAH YOUR MUM, IT WON'T BOTHAH YOU.

AI'M JUST WONDERIN' WOT ZACH THINKS OF ALL THIS.

LET'S ASK HIM.

UM...DUDE, LIKE, WE NEED TO TALK...

DUDE, WE'RE TOTALLY TIGHT AND ALL, BUT... AN ITEM?

WHY NAUT? IT SEEMED LAIKE WE WERE ACTIN' THE PART.

WE ALREADY DO EVERYTHING TOGETHAH. DUNNO 'OW IT'D BE ANY DIFFERENT IF WE'D BEEN...MOAH.

YOU KNOW I'M NAUT EXACTLY EXPERIENCED AT THIS RELATIONSHIP STUFF.

BUT IT SEEMED CLOSE ENOUGH! AI THOUGHT WE 'AD A GOOD MENTAL CONNECTION GOIN' ON.

WE BOTH LAIKE A GOOD TAIME, WE KNOW WE DON'T 'AVE THE BRAINS T' CHANGE THE WORLD. BUT IT WAS NAICE THAT WAY. SIMPLE, UNCOMPLICAITED. AI DUNNO WOT MOAH YOU'D WANT.

AND HONESTLY, LIKE, WHO CAN TELL WHO YOU'RE INTERESTED IN WHEN YOU'RE ALWAYS OFF CHASING TAIL, Y'KNOW?

YOU COULD'VE ASKED ME, DUDE.

SIGH. FAIR ENOUGH.

EH, THAUT'S JUST HORMONES!

IT SOUNDED LAIKE YOU WERE LIVIN' IT UP TOO, SO AI FIGURED WE JUST 'AD AN UNDERSTANDING.

OH THAT? IT'S JUST TALK. LIKE, HOW MANY DUDES ***REALLY*** GET AS MUCH ACTION AS THEY SAY THEY DO??

ER... REALLY?

WHOA! WHEN DO YOU HAVE TIME TO STUDY?

DO YOU BANG YOUR PROFS TOO?

JUST THE ONCE...

SO YOU THINK YOU CAN MAKE THINGS WORK WITH ALLIE, THEN?

MEBBE, YEAH...

I MEAN, WITH YOU, I ALWAYS FEEL LIKE I'M YOUR SIDEKICK OR SOMETHING. LIKE, YOU'RE THE BRAINS OF THE OPERATION, AND I JUST TAG ALONG, ALL HAPPY 'N' STUFF.

AI... DIDN'T KNOW YOU DISLAIKED THAUT.

WELL, I SORTA DIDN'T. I MEAN, EVEN AROUND OTHER DUMB JOCKS AND CHEERLEADERS, I ALWAYS GOT TREATED LIKE I WAS KINDA SLOW. SO I KINDA GOT USED TO IT.

I'M WITH STUPID

ALLIE... WELL...SHE SEEMED MORE COOL ABOUT LISTENING.

CUZ LIKE, I PROLLY WON'T GET THE ANSWER THE FASTEST, BUT I DO GET IT RIGHT SOMETIMES.

IF YOU WAIT UP FOR ME.

AW, IF THAUT'S WOT YOU WAUNT, MAITE, AI CAN TRY THAUT.

I DUNNO, DUDE. YOU'RE PRETTY...UH, HOW TO SAY IT...

FAST?

IMPULSIVE?

ER, IN YOUR OWN LITTLE WORLD?

OH...

I'M SORRY, DUDE...I LOVE YOU MAN, JUST NOT IN... THAT WAY.

SO...EVEN IF IT DOESN'T WORK OUT WITH ALLIE, YOU DON'T THINK...

OH. O-OKAY.

BUT DUDE, LIKE YOU SAID, WE'RE ALWAYS CHILLIN' NOW, IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ANY DIFFERENT.

COME ON, MAITE. WE KNOW IT'S NEVAH THE SAME WITH TWO BUDS AFTAH A GIRL ENTAHS THE EQUAITION...

SPEAKING OF 'ER, WE SHOULD LET 'ER KNOW 'OW WE'RE DOING....

JAKE, AGAIN, I'M REALLY SORRY, IF I'D KNOWN, I--

ME TOO. YA SURE YOU'RE KEWL WITH THIS?

OI, IT'S FAINE, YOU TWO. IT'S MOSTLY MAI FAULT ANYWAY.

ACTUALLY, AI'VE GOT ONE PIECE OF ADVAICE THAT AI THINK WILL REALLY 'ELP YOUR RELATIONSHIP WORK.

YOU DO? REALLY?

YUP! MAIKE IT KNOWN YOU LAIKE TO SLEEP NAIKED. NO WORRIES OF YER FOLKS BUSTIN' IN UNANNOUNCED DURING 'IS... VISITS.

UH...'KAY, THANKS.

OH, AND INCENSE'LL HELP COVAH UP SOMMA TH'EVIDENCE.

Y-YEAH. GOTCHA.

...

...

SO! UM.

BET YOU TWO 'AVE LOTS TO TALK 'BOUT. AI'M OFF.

G'NIGHT!

THE NEXT DAY....

iSQ CHAPTER 14

AH SO.

MAN, TRAFFIC IS TERRIBLE. IT'S A HOLIDAY WEEKEND, PEOPLE!

I THOUGHT YOU L.A. TYPES WOULD BE USED TO THIS.

L.A.'S NOT THIS BAD, TRUST ME.

SO...DID YOUR PARENTS GIVE YOU A HARD TIME ABOUT SAM?

ONLY YESTERDAY. FORTUNATELY MY COUSIN'S KID ETHAN TURNED OUT TO BE AN EARLY WALKER, SO HE KEPT EVERYONE BUSY. MY FOLKS NEVER GOT A CHANCE TO SPILL THE FULL DETAILS.

I STILL THINK MY FATHER IS SECRETLY IMPRESSED. I KNOW MY COUSIN BRANDON WAS...

HEH!

BUT YEAH, NOW I'M GLAD I HAD TO GET AN EARLY FLIGHT BACK. YOU WANNA HANG OUT NOW?

SURE! BUT AREN'T YOU EAGER TO SEE DOUG?

AW, HE'S OUT OF TOWN STILL...

ROBBIE'S FAMILY INVITED THEM ALL UP FOR THANKSGIVING.

THEY'RE KINDA FAR NORTH, SO THEY WON'T BE DRIVING BACK 'TIL SUNDAY.

AND HONESTLY... I'M A BIT NERVOUS ABOUT SEEING HIM.

WHY'S THAT?

IT'S JUST... FINALS WILL BE STARTING SOON...

AND I THINK DOUG'S GONNA WANT TO GET BUSY BEFORE I GET TOO BUSY.

...IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.

HAVEN'T YOU TALKED ABOUT THAT?

NOVEMBER

OF COURSE. BUT...WELL, THEN I'LL BE GONE SIX WEEKS FOR WINTER BREAK, AND I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE HIM HANGING.

AND I SUPPOSE IT'D BE NICE TO SPREAD SOME HOLIDAY CHEER.

C'MON, DON'T FORCE IT.

LOOK, IF YOU'RE STILL FEELING THAT NERVOUS ABOUT ALL THIS...

I THINK I MIGHT'VE FIGURED OUT WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK.

OH?

WELL, YOU ARE A JOCK... SURELY YOUV'E ENCOUNTERED OTHER HOT, FRIENDLY GUYS BESIDES TODD.

'COURSE. AND DON'T CALL ME SHIRLEY!

AND, FOR A LONG TIME, I BET YOU WERE THE BIGGEST GUY IN YOUR SCHOOL... MAYBE EVEN YOUR DIVISIONS. EVERYONE KNEW IT...CUZ YOU'D MAKE SURE THEY KNEW IT.

I'VE SEEN YOU AMP UP THE TESTOSTERONE WHENEVER YOU'RE AROUND OTHER BIG GUYS... LIKE WITH THOR. YOU GO ALL...ALPHA MALE. DOMINANT. AND I'D GUESS YOU WIN ANY PISSING MATCH YOU START.

SO YOU KEPT ALL HUNKY GUYS AT ARM'S DISTANCE, BY FORCE. CUZ BASICALLY, THE FURTHER THEY WERE, THE LESS LIKELY YOU'D GET TEMPTED. OR NOTICED.

BUT DOUG WAS A DIFFERENT STORY. FOR THE FIRST TIME, THERE WAS SOMEONE THAT YOU COULDN'T FORCE TO BACK AWAY. YOU HAD NO IDEA WHAT ELSE TO DO... AND YOUR ONLY CHOICE WAS TO GIVE IN TO YOUR HORMONES.

THEN, DOUG TURNED OUT TO BE SUBMISSIVE. YET NOW YOU ASSOCIATE BEING DOMINANT WITH EMOTIONAL DISTANCE, NOT INTIMACY. SO THAT'S GOT THE TWO OF YOU AT A STALEMATE. YOU JUST NEED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO GET AROUND THAT.

WAIT WAIT, HOLD ON A SEC, JEFF...

ARE YOU SAYING THE ONLY REASON I'M GOING OUT WITH DOUG IS CUZ HE'S BIGGER THAN ME?

NO, NO...BUT THAT'S WHAT GOT YOUR ATTENTION, RIGHT?

ER...I SUPPOSE.

NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT.

SO ANYWAY...

IF YOU'RE CONFUSING INTIMACY WITH SOME KIND OF POWER PLAY, TRY TO EVEN THE ODDS. THINK OF HIS PHYSICAL ABILITIES THAT YOU ADMIRE IN OTHER CONTEXTS, AND ASSOCIATE HIS BODY WITH SOMETHING BESIDES BRUTE STRENGTH.

DO YOU LIKE TO WATCH HIM WALL CLIMB?

OR BE FEARLESS ON ROLLER COASTERS?

OR MOVE THAT HUGE FRAME BACK AND FORTH OVER THE BASKETBALL COURT WITHOUT WEARING OUT?

OR USE THOSE HUGE MUSCLES WITH SURPRISING PRECISION IN POOL?

OR EVEN JUST SPONTANEOUSLY HAVE FUN AND ROCK OUT TO MUSIC?

INTERESTING THOUGHT. IF I DIDN'T KNOW BETTER, I'D SAY YOU WERE AFTER HIM!

BUT...DOUG DOESN'T LIKE POOL. NATE WAS OUR FOURTH.

AND HE NEVER ROCKS OUT! HE CAN'T WITH HIS MUSIC.

UH, RIGHT, RIGHT, MY BAD.

HEH-HEH! JUST TRYING TO GET YOU REVVED.

OH. YEAH, OF COURSE.

MORE THAN BRUTE STRENGTH, EH? UH...ACTUALLY, ALL OF THAT SOUNDS MORE LIKE...

...TRAITS OF *MINE*, THAT *YOU'VE* BEEN GETTING REVVED ABOUT.

SCREECH

S'THERE SOMETHING I SHOULD KNOW, JEFF?

UM...

SO... ARE YOU CRUSHING ON ME, JEFF?

DO I LOOK LIKE THE KINDA GUY THAT'D CHASE SOMEONE WITH A STEADY?

THAT... DOESN'T EXACTLY ANSWER MY QUESTION.

I KNOW, BUT I CAN TELL WHERE YOU'RE GOING WITH THAT.

C'MON, WHEN YOU WERE TRYING TO GET WITH DOUG, I WAS YOUR SOUNDING BOARD, THERAPIST, CHEERLEADER...

*HM...MAYBE NOT THE BEST TIME TO BRING UP JUST **HOW** MUCH I HELPED THERE...*

WHY WOULD I WASTE MY TIME IF I WANTED YOU MYSELF?

I...DUNNO. MAYBE YOU WERE GIVING ME BAD ADVICE, HOPING TO CATCH ME ON THE REBOUND AFTER THINGS WENT SOUTH.

WHAT?! GEE, THANKS. YOU REALLY THINK I'D PLAY WITH BOTH OF YOUR EMOTIONS LIKE THAT?

ER, NO! I'M SORRY, I DIDN'T MEAN IT LIKE THAT, IT'S JUST...YEAH, YOU ENCOURAGED ME TO DATE HIM. BUT NOW IT FEELS LIKE YOU'RE SAYING I WAS AFTER HIM FOR ALL THE WRONG REASONS IN THE FIRST PLACE!

THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT! I WAS TRYING TO HELP... I THOUGHT I'D MADE A BREATHROUGH AFTER ALL THIS TIME.

SURE, SURE.... WITH YOUR OH-SO-SUBTLE HINT THAT A SMALLER GUY WON'T GET MY GUARD UP? SOMEONE, LIKE, SAY, HMM...YOU?

YEAH, WELL, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK, FOR THE RECORD...I WOULDN'T BOTHER.

OH REALLY?

I DON'T KID MYSELF. YOU BIG GUYS ALWAYS GO FOR OTHER BIG GUYS.

HOW SHALLOW DO YOU THINK I AM? AND PLEASE. DON'T PRETEND THAT YOU DON'T KNOW HOW HAWT YOU ARE TOO.

I...BUT, UM....I...

UH-HUH. THAT'S WHAT YOU WANTED TO HEAR, ISN'T IT?

University Dr

YES. NO. I MEAN, IT WAS, BUT I HAD NO RIGHT TO FORCE IT OUT OF YOU.

YOU DIDN'T FORCE IT OUT OF ME. I... GUH.

Y'KNOW... I'M STARTING TO THINK...DOUG WOULDN'T LIKE THE DIRECTION THIS IS GOING.

MAYBE YOU AND I SHOULD...TAKE A BREAK, 'TIL WE'RE SURE WHERE WE STAND WITH EACH OTHER.

I CAN JUST WALK TO CAMPUS FROM HERE.

CODY, WAIT, DON'T--!

OKAY, MAYBE YOU'RE RIGHT.

I DON'T WANT TO...GET YOU IN TROUBLE WITH HIM.

LATER.

TAKE CARE...

WELL, I GUESS CODY'S OUT OF THE PICTURE NOW. HAPPY?

SO YOU LEAVE HIM THE HELL ALONE, ALRIGHT?

YEAH, WHATEVER.

BACK AT RICHTER HALL...

WELL, HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT.

NOW I WONDER HOW MUCH OF JEFF'S ADVICE WAS GIVEN UNDER ULTERIOR MOTIVES.

MAYBE ALL THAT MUMBO JUMBO ABOUT HOW I SHOULD WAIT 'TIL I'M READY WAS JUST MAKING ME STALL UNTIL IT WAS TOO LATE.

NO. I DON'T BELIEVE THAT. DO I?

EITHER WAY, I STILL GOTTA DO SOMETHING BEFORE WINTER BREAK.

NO MORE WAFFLING. TOMORROW, I'M GOING TO INITIATE THINGS FOR ONCE.

AND IF HE CAN DEAL WITH THAT, GREAT. WE CAN HANG OUT AGAIN. IF NOT, HELL WITH HIM.

DAMN, I JUST NEED OPENING IDEAS. I SHOULD GO AND... WAIT, I CAN'T TALK TO JEFF. NOT NOW.

I'LL GIVE HIM A NIGHT TO REMEMBER. THEN I CAN GO TELL JEFF THAT THINGS WITH DOUG AND I COULDN'T BE BETTER.

BUT... WHAT EXACTLY AM I GONNA DO? I HAVE NO IDEA WHERE TO BEGIN. I NEVER DO. I DON'T WANT TO MAKE A FOOL OF MYSELF.

I THINK NATE SAID HE HAS NO PHONE SERVICE WHERE HE IS NOW. HE'S NOT BACK 'TIL LATE TOMORROW. DOUG'S GOING TO CALL ME IN THE AFTERNOON.

WHO ELSE CAN I ASK? TREVOR? HE SAID I COULD ASK HIM ANYTHING. NO, HE'S OUT OF TOWN WITH DOUG, TOO.

CRAP.

WHERE AM I GONNA...?

HMMM...

Downloading...

LET'S GET ON WITH THIS.

!!!

CREAK

BRUNO TANAKIN © D. NOTO

NOVENTA © C. ZAWADZKI

PLEASE DON'T ASK WHAT I WAS DOING
PLEASE DON'T ASK WHAT I WAS DOING
PLEASE DON'T ASK WHAT I WAS DOING
PLEASE DON'T ASK WHAT I WAS DOING...

JAKE? YOU OKAY?

OI?

SORRY, MAITE, DIDN'T SEE YOU THEAH. AI'LL...LEAVE YOU BE.

NO, WAIT!

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO. I'M NOT MAD AT YOU. I NEVER WAS. I JUST DIDN'T GET A CHANCE TO TELL YOU THAT.

OH. WELL, IF YOU SAY SO, THANKS. STILL, AI'LL TRY TO MAIND MY OWN BUSINESS NEXT TAIME.

BUT...

LOOK, JAKE, IT WAS REALLY NOTHING TO BEAT YOURSELF UP ABOUT.

UH. ERM, HONESTLY, CODY... AI'VE KAINDA GOT A LOT ELSE ON MY MAIND RAIGHT NOW.

OH. SORRY. DO YOU...WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?

NAUT REALLY.

SERIOUSLY, I KNOW WE HAVEN'T TALKED MUCH, BUT I APPRECIATE THAT YOU'VE BEEN TRYING TO HELP. THE LEAST I CAN DO IS LISTEN IF YOU NEED TO VENT.

THEAH'S NAUT MUCH ANYONE CAN DO RAIGHT NOW.

AI'LL BE FAINE WITH A LITTLE MORE TAIME, IS ALL. STILL JUST... IN SHOCK. AI'M NAUT USED TO REJECTION.

YOU MEAN YOU TWO WEREN'T A COUPLE ALREADY?

AI KNOW, RAIGHT? AI WOZ UNDAH THAUT IMPRESSION TOO!

AI REALLY THOUGHT ZACH AND AI 'AD A GOOD THING GOING.

ZACH? REJECTION?

SO WHAT HAPPENED?

DAMN, HARSH. SORRY TO HEAR IT.

BASICALLY, AI FOUND OUT AI WAS NEVAH IN THE RUNNIN' WHEN MAI LITTLE COUSIN HOOKED UP WITH 'IM.

EH, THAUT'S LIFE.

YER LUCKY, MAITE; AI THINK WOMEN ARE A LOT BETTAH AT SHOWIN' THEIR INTENTIONS UP FRONT. BUT WITH TWO BLOKES, THE LAINE BETWEEN BEIN' BUDDIES AND BEIN' AN AITEM CAN BE A FAINE ONE.

HUH, WHAT I JUST WENT THROUGH WITH JEFF IS SURE PROOF OF THAT.

MAYBE HE'LL FEEL BETTER IF I TELL HIM I CAN RELATE.

AW, NO SENSE OPENING UP ANOTHER CAN OF WORMS. LET HIM VENT AND BE DONE WITH IT.

ON THE CONTRARY, THIS IS THE PERFECT TIME TO COME CLEAN ABOUT EVERYTHING YOU'VE HIDDEN FROM HIM THE ENTIRE SEMESTER.

I'M WARNIN' YA, FEATHERBRAIN. BACK OFF.

NOT THIS TIME.

DON'T LISTEN TA HIM, STICK TO THA TOPIC AT HAND.

YOU KNOW IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO.

WHUTCHA GONNA DO, HALO ME TA DEATH?

THAT DOES IT! BRING IT, BITCH!

ACTUALLY, JAKE...

YOU KNOW MY DATE WITH SAM THAT YOU WALKED IN ON? IT WAS ALL A FAKE, A BIG SHOW FOR MY PARENTS. WE WERE PLANNING TO BREAK UP THEN ANYWAY.

THERE'S NO BECKY OR JESSIE OR WHATEVER. SO YOU DIDN'T RUIN ANYTHING...IN FACT, YOU HELPED MIX THINGS UP A BIT JUST AS WE KINDA GOT STUCK.

REALLY? BUT...WHY FAKE IT?

I DIDN'T WANT TO TELL THEM... I'M GAY.

I WAS HOPING YOU'D LOOK A BIT MORE SHOCKED.

ERM, NO, AI THINK AI GET IT.

AI MEAN, SAM ALWAYS DID STRAIKE ME AS A BIT OF A BALLBUSTAH...AI CAN SEE 'ER TURNING A GUY OFF WOMEN PERMANENTLY.

OR...DO YOU MEAN YOU STARTED QUESTIONING YOURSELF CUZ THAUT FAINE SPECIMEN OF A WOMAN DID NOTHIN' TO HOIST YER MAINSAIL?

WHAT? NO NO NO, I DIDN'T FIGURE IT OUT JUST NOW; I'VE KNOWN FOR SIX YEARS. SAM AGREED TO PRETEND TO BE MY GIRLFRIEND FOR THAT NIGHT.

IT WASN'T THAT. YOU WERE JUST SO...FORWARD. I THOUGHT...YOU'D, KINDA POUNCE ME THE INSTANT YOU FOUND OUT WE BOTH LIKE MEN.

YOU MEAN... FROM THE FIRST TAIME WE MET, YOU DIDN'T WANT ME TO KNOW YOU WERE GAY? AW, CODY...YOU SHOULDA KNOWN AI'D BE THE LAUST BLOKE TO JUDGE YOU ABOUT IT.

OI. AI CAME ACROSS AS THAUT MUCH OF A SEXUAL PREDATAH?

SIGH. YEAH, 'FRAID SO.

AHEM

EH, AI SUPPOSE AI DESERVE THAUT. BUT CROSS MAI HEART...EVERY ENCOUNTAH AI'VE 'AD HAS BEEN 100% CONSENSUAL. IF YOU WERE UNWILLING, AI'D NEVAH 'AVE TOUCHED YOU.

WHO SAYS I WOULD'VE BEEN UNWILLING?

WOT?!

THAT'S RIGHT. IF YOU'D STARTED ANYTHING, I WAS WORRIED I WOULDN'T STOP YOU.

SERIOUSLY?

SERIOUSLY. JAKE, YOU WERE THE HOTTEST GUY I'D EVER MET IN MY LIFE.

WHEN I FIRST SAW YOU ON THE AIRPLANE, IT TOOK EVERY OUNCE OF SELF-RESTRAINT I HAD TO NOT TACKLE YOU TO THE GROUND THEN AND THERE AND RUN MY TONGUE UP AND DOWN THOSE PERFECT WASHBOARD ABS OF YOURS.

EVERYTHING YOU DO IS A MASSIVE TURN-ON. THE WAY YOU MOVE, THE WAY YOU...SORTA DRESS, THE WAY YOU CRINKLE YOUR EYES WHEN YOU SMILE. *EVERYTHING.*

IT WAS A CONSTANT BARRAGE OF TEMPTATION BEING IN THE SAME ROOM WITH YOU.

OI! AI'M VERY FLATTERED, MAITE, THANKS. BUT WOULD IT 'AVE BEEN SUCH A CRAIME IF YOU HAD GIVEN INTO YOUR HORMONES? YOU WEREN'T SEEING ANYONE, WERE YOU?

NO, BUT I AM NOW. AND I DUNNO, I'M FREAKING OUT ABOUT LETTING GO WITH HIM, TOO.

WELL, THAUT'S PRESSURE TO PERFORM. WITH ME, AI JUST WOULD'VE WANTED TO 'AVE FUN, NO STRINGS ATTACHED. YOU COULD'VE EXPERIMENTED. MAYBE YOU'RE JUST OVAHTHINKING IT.

HE'S GOT A POINT, THOUGH. DOUG WASN'T YOUR ONLY OPTION--AT LEAST, NOT AT FIRST. SO... THERE'S JAKE, WHO'S FORWARD AND WILLING, AND THEN DOUG WAY AT THE OTHER END OF THE SPECTRUM, WHO'S QUIET AND SUBMISSIVE. AND YOU'RE EQUALLY SHY WITH BOTH OF THEM? SO IF THIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT DOUG, THEN WHAT IS IT? STOP THINKING OF THE BAGGAGE WITH DOUG. OR JAKE. OR JEFF, OR TODD, OR NATE, OR ANYONE YOU'VE HAD SEXUAL TENSION WITH... WHAT'S REALLY PUTTING THE KIBOSH ON YOUR LIBIDO?

MAYBE I WANTED MORE THAN JUST A FLING.

OR MAYBE...

BEEP

BEEP

BOOP

CLICK

...IT'S CUZ IT WOULD'VE MEANT I WAS GAY.

ERM, DIDN'T WE JUST GO THROUGH THIS? YOU SAID YOU WERE--?

HEH, OKAY, I KNOW THAT MAY NOT MAKE MUCH SENSE, BUT...IT'S JUST... WELL, I'M STILL, ERM...A VIRGIN. AND HAVING SEX, TO ME, WAS KINDA THE POINT OF NO RETURN HERE.

SEE, I KNEW I WAS INTERESTED IN THE MALE BODY FOR YEARS. I LIKED HOW IT LOOKED, HOW IT FELT... YES, EVEN THE WAY IT SMELLED...

AND I HAD ZERO INTEREST IN THE FEMALE BODY, SO THE SIMPLEST CONCLUSION WAS THAT I WAS GAY.

BUT THERE WAS ALWAYS THE REASSURANCE THAT MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, MY FASCINATION IN THE MALE BODY AMOUNTED TO NOTHING MORE THAN ADMIRATION FOR SOMETHING WELL-CONSTRUCTED.

LIKE...THE WAY ALMOST ANYONE WILL CONSIDER A FERRARI NICER TO EXPERIENCE THAN A PINTO. MAYBE I WAS ACTUALLY ASEXUAL.

UNTIL I HAD... WELL, SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH A GUY...

AND... *LIKED* IT...

THEN *TECHNICALLY* I WASN'T HOMOSEXUAL, RIGHT?

AT LEAST THAT WAS BETTER THAN BEING A FLAMING QUEER, RIGHT? MAYBE I COULD APPEAR TO HAVE A NORMAL LIFE AS THE "PERPETUAL BACHELOR." SURE, THAT STILL MAKES SOME PEOPLE WONDER, BUT NOTHING LIKE WHEN YOU HAVE A MALE "ROOMMATE" YOUR WHOLE LIFE.

SO THAT'S IT. EVERYTHING ELSE HAS BEEN EXCUSES AND SPECULATION AND THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS. BUT I KNEW ONCE I GAVE INTO MY SEXUAL URGES--REALLY, WHETHER IT WAS WITH A GUY OR NOT--THAT WOULD BE IT, DEFINITIVELY. AND I WASN'T PREPARED FOR THAT.

I GUESS THIS MAKES IT THE FINAL TEST.

AND I CAN'T KEEP RUNNING FROM IT. I HAVE TO KNOW FOR SURE.

WOW. OH MAN, ALL THESE MONTHS OF STRESSING. AND THAT...THAT'S ALL IT IS?

WHAT A RELIEF.

WELL, NOW THAUT YOU KNOW, WOT'RE YA GONNA DO ABOUT IT?

WELL, IT'S LIKE... I WAS SO AFRAID OF THE LIFESTYLE AND CULTURE AND ALL, I CONVINCED MYSELF MY ORIENTATION WOULD HINGE ON ONE ACT. BUT...WELL, AFTER ALL THAT'S HAPPENED THESE PAST FEW MONTHS...I GUESS I'VE PROVED TO MYSELF THAT MY IDENTITY IS MORE COMPLEX THAN IF I'M GAY OR NOT. AND YET...I FOUND IT'S NOT SO BAD IF IT'S A STARTING POINT. SO....THAT HUGE FEAR OF ***BEING*** GAY IS...SORTA COMPLETELY IRRELEVANT NOW.

I WAS SO WORRIED IT'D RULE MY LIFE, IT DID IN THE END. WHETHER I GO THROUGH WITH ANY SEX OR NOT, I KNOW I'M GAY. I'VE KNOWN ALL ALONG.

THANKS FOR TALKING THROUGH THIS WITH ME, JAKE.

ANYTIME, CODY.

SO, ENOUGH ABOUT ME, HOW'RE YOU FEELING?

WELL...STILL NAUT GREAT, BUT BETTAH. AI MEAN...IT'LL TAKE AWHILE BEFORE AI GET OVAH HIM...BUT AT LEAST NOW, WELL...IT HELPS KNOWING THAT NOW AI'VE GOT SOMEONE ELSE AI CAN TALK TO ABOUT IT.

AND AI CAN'T DENY IT, ALL YOUR EGO-BOOSTING SURE DIDN'T HURT AFTAH BEING REJECTED.

WELL, I MEANT EVERY WORD OF IT.

YOU'RE WELCOME...

THANK YA, MAITE.

TO BE CONTINUED JULY 2009